

# LEARNING RESPECT: A CASE STUDY OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN VET AT WUGULARR

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## **Abstract**

Indigenous learners in remote communities comprise a large proportion of the learners engaged in Vocational Education & Training (VET) in the Northern Territory. Given the high participation rates, course and unit level completion rates remain low. Understanding what constitutes good community engagement is essential to any consideration of VET delivery and assessment practice that seeks to meet the expectations of remote community members.

This paper reports the findings of a case study of indigenous community engagement by Charles Darwin University (CDU) among indigenous learners in the community of Wugularr in south-eastern Arnhem Land. Whilst the majority of participants expressed satisfaction with the quality of their teaching and learning experiences, in particular the performance of teaching staff, they were disappointed with the university's approach to relationship building, the continuity and consistency of VET delivery and its associated student support. Community members expressed a desire for teaching staff to consistently return to the community and develop ongoing long term relationships which include active support and follow up of learners who did not attain module or course level completion.

The study's findings point to the university's need to consistently embed good community engagement practice in the negotiation, delivery and evaluation of VET in indigenous communities; and highlights the importance of developing meaningful longer term relationships with indigenous communities that facilitate the achievement of community negotiated outcomes based on mutual benefit to the community and university alike. This paper discusses the implications of these to regional universities including CDU that seek to serve remote indigenous communities.

## Introduction:

VET training to Indigenous Australians living in remote communities is an important and growing market in which Charles Darwin University (CDU) is both highly experienced and uniquely placed in Northern Australia to deliver. The university has a strong commitment to the continued engagement and development of health and education outcomes in remote indigenous communities. Charles Darwin University has realigned its strategic direction to include community engagement as part of its core business alongside the more traditional areas of teaching & learning and research. Indigenous participation and relevance is a key element of the university's strategic direction as outlined in the Futures Framework 2007 - 2016 1st in 5 in 10 Strategy (CDU, 2006). Community engagement is critical to all university activities and is characterised by two-way relationships in which the university forms partnerships with its communities to yield mutually beneficial outcomes (Cuttriss, 2007).

Whilst community engagement is still very much an area of emerging knowledge, it remains an area of key strategic future development to the university. In its report on the future responses of higher education to regional need the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggests that for universities: *"The agenda has moved on from a desire to simply increase the general education of the population and the output of scientific research; there is now a greater concern to harness university education and research to specific economic and social objectives"* (OECD 1999, p9).

Effective community engagement provides a mechanism to strengthen and expand partnerships between indigenous communities, educational institutions, government, industry and broader community networks (AUCEA, 2005). CDU is however not alone in this realignment; regional universities nationally and globally serve large and diverse communities of people that may be from urban, regional and remote settings, and in particular remote indigenous communities. To this end Cuttriss & Wallace (2006) note the importance of community engagement to realign the activities of regional universities with the regional priorities of the communities they service and bring these communities into the global knowledge economy.

Garlick & Pryor (2002) describe the process of community engagement to be deeply rooted in the development and maintenance of trust relationships based on mutual benefit, consisting of: *"Active Engagement and learning for the partners both in process and outcome; it is built on demonstrable and ongoing commitment, clear expectations, trust, and has tangible quantitative and qualitative outcomes for the community and the university."* (p.6)

This statement defines the process that should guide best practice engagement and delivery of all education including VET programs to indigenous communities. It also highlights an area of potential disparity between responding to community aspirations and community timeframes and the outcome, fiscally oriented objectives of large public VET providers such as CDU.

A considerable volume of literature supports the significance of effective and committed community engagement strategies when working with indigenous communities. Dodson and Morton's report examining an indigenous Engagement Project between the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and the Australian National University (ANU) considered that an effective engagement strategy would lead to an increase in the employment of indigenous people and the development and implementation of research that is inclusive of indigenous interests (Morton & Dodson, 2005). Similarly a report prepared by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework on engaging indigenous communities identifies several factors that are critical to successful engagement. This includes awareness that the process of education implies active encouragement of relationship building and community involvement that values the skills and knowledge community members and fosters community ownership (AFLN, 2006). Whilst these and other reports make very valuable observations on why we should engage indigenous communities well, few propose ways in which these assertions can be practically applied to actual community contexts.

In considering how we engage indigenous communities it is important to define what is it to be 'indigenous' and how this influences the perception of 'community'. The United Nations working group on indigenous people, (United Nations, 1987) define being indigenous as not only inhabiting a region prior to its colonisation but also have maintained at least in part their distinct linguistic, cultural and social characteristics, remaining distinct from the dominant culture of colonisation. Across Australia there are an immense number of communities occupied by indigenous people. In the indigenous community sense the word 'community' may be to describe groups of people identifying by kinship, language or belonging to a particular place or 'country'. Communities can have similar or separate cultural values with a single individual or group of people conceivably belonging to a number of communities (Yunkaporta, 2007). Accordingly definitions of communities are as wide-ranging and diverse as the communities themselves; there is no one definition of community that can be simply applied; to do so ignores the diversity of groupings within communities (Peters-Little, 2000). These notions are important as they hint at both the challenges inherent in engaging indigenous communities and perhaps more significantly

the importance of truly engaging indigenous communities with a spirit of mutual benefit and a willingness to shared understanding and knowledge for the future.

In a recent review of CDU's indigenous community engagement Campbell and Christie (2008a) surmise that in a developing community engagement strategy it is necessary to be aware of the multiple ways that 'community' is defined, and relate the engagement strategy to the needs of the particular community. In such a discussion it is essential to consider how non-indigenous or '*Balanda*' educators working with indigenous people in the top end of the Northern Territory perceive the concept '*community*' within indigenous contexts very differently to the indigenous people or '*Bininj*' living in these communities themselves. This recognition of the cultural uniqueness of individual communities as well as their spiritual relationship to surrounding '*country*' and neighbouring communities is essential. In practice terms this places vocational educators on a continuum of being actively involved in learning about the individual cultural, historical and spiritual characteristics of indigenous communities where they deliver VET.

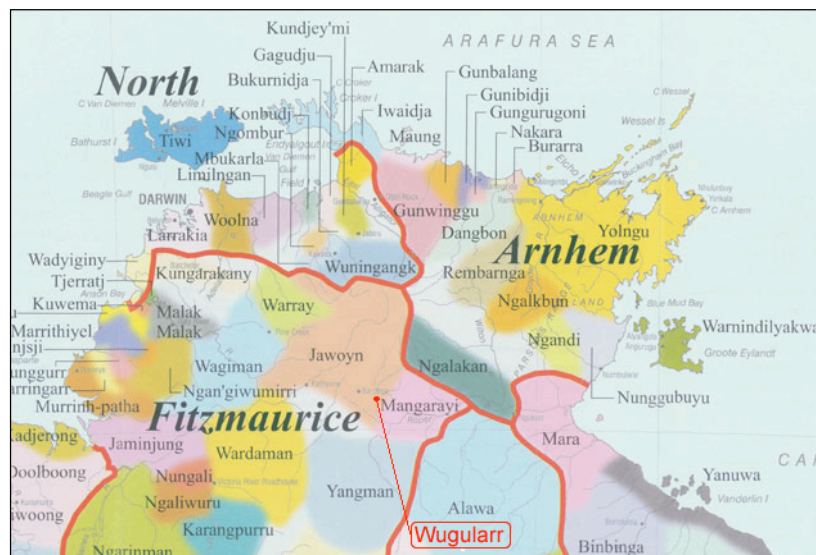
## **Wugularr- A Community Profile**

The community of Wugularr, also known as Beswick is situated approximately 118km south east of Katherine and 31 km east of the neighbouring community of Barunga on the banks of the Waterhouse River, in Southern Arnhem Land. Wugularr is situated in Jawoyn Country, which occupies all lands around Katherine in a roughly triangular area that extends from Mataranka in the south along the Stuart Highway in a north westerly direction to near Pine creek and in the east to Bulman as shown in Figure 1. Early settlement in this region by non-indigenous people was strongly centred on the development of the pastoral and mining industries. The arrival of these industries in traditional Aboriginal lands resulted in a major disruption to traditional life amongst Aboriginal people living in the Katherine region (Merlan, 1998). During this time the Beswick cattle station was established by the Nagadgoli Cattle Company to provide a training site for Aboriginal stockmen. Its closure in 1984 left the Wugularr community without this valuable source of income enterprise and training opportunities (Schwab & Sutherland, 2008).

People from at least 11 different language groups live in the community consisting of: Jawoyn, Ngalkbon, Rembarrnga, Mayali, Mara, Rithangu, Mudbara, Jingili, Woyala, Mangarrayi, and Warlpiri people. Whilst a diversity of traditional languages from each of these groups is spoken, the most frequently spoken and understood language is Kriol with English as a second or third language (Schwab & Sutherland 2004). Whilst English is spoken by the majority

of indigenous residents 63 people (17%) reported they spoke little or no English at all (ABS, 2008a).

The population at the 2006 census indicating their usual place of residence as Wugularr, was 390 persons (ABS 2008b). The median age of people living in this local government region is 23 years, which is significantly less than the figure of 31 years for the rest of the Northern Territory (ABS 2008b). There are 70 households situated within the community, 67 of which are occupied by indigenous people (96%). Thirty percent of these households reported that they have 6 or more residents; which were reported to be mainly immediate family and extended family members (ABS 2008b). Weekly household incomes are low with 49% of indigenous households reporting gross weekly incomes less than \$499 and 78% of households receiving gross incomes of less than \$999 (ABS 2008c)



**Figure 1: Location of Wugularr community in relation to surrounding Aboriginal lands by language group (Excerpt from Horton, 2000)**

Like many other indigenous communities in the Northern Territory chronic diseases including diabetes, heart disease and kidney disease significantly reduce life expectancy and place heavy burdens on the limited allied health services within the community. These issues are further exacerbated by licit and illicit substance use problems by community members and visitors from other centres. Wugularr is a restricted area under the Northern Territory Government's Liquor Act, which prohibits the consumption of all alcohol outside of designated consumption areas within the community (NTG, 2007). The Roper Gulf Shire Council (RGSC) operates a community patrol service a role formerly performed by the smaller Nyirrannggulong Mardrulk Ngadberre Regional Community Council (NMNRC) prior to recent council amalgamations.

The clinic and youth centre is managed by the Sunrise Health Service, and are staffed by a team of two registered nurses, one youth outreach worker and four Aboriginal health workers. The clinic co-ordinates a two day per week doctor's visit along with regular visits by specialists and other allied health and community services. A variety of health promotion programs exist in the community including a partnership with the Fred Hollows Foundation to improve child nutrition through the management of the community store (NTG 2007). In the last year a larger, new, well-resourced school has been built on high ground above usual wet season flood levels, which is perceived by most community members as a very significant and positive change toward the future.

## **Literature Review**

Adult training in Wugularr is dominated by large public training providers such as CDU formerly Northern Territory University (NTU), which accounted for 27 of the 36 student enrolments during the period 1991-2001. Areas of VET delivery included: health studies, creative arts, business, community broadcasting, local government, first aid, community services and sport and recreation.

Completion rates as collected by DEET for unit modules delivered during this period were 73% for female students and 62% for male students (Schwab & Sutherland 2008). Also revealed was NTU's previous inability to report completion rates for courses that were delivered during this period. Schwab and Sutherland summarise that the standard records kept by the university prior to 2001 was generally poor.

Since the amalgamation of Northern Territory University (NTU) with Centralian College to form CDU this situation has changed significantly with the university being able to provide complete and up to date records of all subsequent VET training delivered to all communities including Wugularr. In 2008 the university has undertaken a major restructure of its VET programs. The 'Doing VET better' initiative specifically seeks to embed continuous improvement strategies into VET delivery in urban, regional and remote settings across the Northern Territory. This is reflected in CDU's 2008 operational plan for the CDU's division of Primary Industries and Community Services under 'Doing VET better' which has as its expressed aim: *"ensuring that our training profile and courses are aligned to the needs of Northern Territory Industry and/or build remote and regional community sustainability"* (CDU 2008, p2).

A recent policy monograph published by the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) was quite critical of VET education in the NT citing that whilst the university delivers VET courses in over 100 rural and remote locations and its equipment is of a high standard many participants

treat VET courses as holidays due to their low literacy levels (Hughes 2008). Hughes also states that *“pass rates are high, with certificates I, II, III and even IV freely dispensed because everyone knows that they are only valid for CDEP jobs”* (Hughes 2008, p15). She continues by saying that vocational training can only begin when trainees have a command of the English language, are literate and numerate. These statements unnecessarily simplify what is a complex and challenging situation. They downplay the potential importance of flexible delivery and assessment within units of competence placed in training packages, which can include multiliteracies that incorporate traditional, and community-spoken languages. Hughes assertions also fail to recognise the importance of effective community engagement and ongoing relationship building with community members in the negotiation of VET delivery. In all these aspects there is a definite need for all regional universities working with remote indigenous learners to continually strive to improve indigenous community engagement in their educational practice, a point that is also made by Campbell and Christie(2008a). They particularly emphasise the importance of long-term relationship building with indigenous communities by all university teaching staff if delivery in VET and higher education, or as research partners is to be successful and avoid community fatigue.

The National Centre for Vocational Educational Research (NCVER) further expands on the complexity of successful delivery in a review of vocational and educational training for indigenous Australians. In this paper Miller (2004) proposed seven factors considered to be critical in the successful engagement and delivery of VET training in indigenous communities. Amongst these are; the involvement of and 'ownership' of training by local communities, the incorporation of indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge & values into training programs, the establishment of true partnerships between indigenous communities and flexibility in course design, content and delivery. All of these points extend the scope of discussion for successful VET delivery well beyond literacy and numeracy considerations.

CDU has had many success stories in the delivery of rural and remote education to indigenous communities. Its commitment to improving delivery through the integration of community engagement into its teaching and learning practices in both VET and Higher Education sectors is well documented. Case studies in the university's recent indigenous Community Engagement (ICE) project such as; 'Working from Our Strengths: indigenous Community Engagement through Enterprise Development and Training' (Wallace & Curry in Campbell & Christie, 2008a), 'Djelk Rangers and Charles Darwin University: What can we learn about indigenous community engagement?' (Williams in Campbell & Christie 2008a) and 'Research, collaboration, and community development –a holistic approach' (Gorman & Garnett

in Campbell & Christie, 2008a) demonstrate the strength and quality of this commitment among many individuals and teams. This quality of individual commitment demonstrates the university's reliance on *"relationships developed by individual lecturers and community members through personal involvement"* (Cuttriss, 2006).

In their emerging findings, Campbell and Christie (2008b, p2) reported that: *"Good indigenous community engagement starts with respect, which is a quality of individuals rather than institutions. There is something inescapably personal about good indigenous community engagement, something that the university cannot offer but can recognise and support"*.

Whilst citing many success stories documented amongst the case studies from their project Campbell and Christie also assert that there have been many examples of relatively poor engagement of indigenous communities by regional universities serving remote communities, including CDU. Wugularr is a community that faces considerable challenges educationally. Wugularr exemplifies this situation well. A study for the Fred Hollows Foundation found that not one child, passed the year 3 literacy test benchmark in 2001 (Novak, 2006), a figure that almost certainly poses significant implications to school based education and VET in the near future.

Personal communication with key Wugularr community representatives at the commencement of this case study revealed there is significant community disillusionment with the university amongst both its indigenous and non-indigenous members. This case study documents a cross section of CDU's past engagement in VET delivery in this community and proposes strategies to rebuild trust, respect and re-establish expectations of mutual benefit between the university and Wugularr in the future.

## **Methodology:**

Records of training instances delivered by the university between 2006- 2007 in Wugularr were examined to identify potential issues that may be present amongst learners in the community. These issues were identified and used to formulate discussion points that would guide an initial round of community consultation and focus groups.

Permission was sought from the Northern Land Council (NLC) and the Wugularr community to conduct a consultation of its members with the express purpose to evaluate the University's history of Community Engagement in Wugularr. Permission was sought through the Jawoyn traditional landowners family prior to entry and confirmed with a senior traditional elder on entry. Consent was obtained from each participant to collect, analyse and report on data



received from this consultation process. Ethical clearance for this case study was provided by the university's ICE project to which this case study informs (Campbell & Christie 2008a).

A series of small focus groups and individual consultations was conducted over three days with 11 community members. Consultations were open to participants who indicated that they had recent previous experience as learners in VET courses run by CDU, were present at the time in the Wugularr community and most importantly expressed a willingness to relate their stories. It must be stressed at this point that the sample represents a relatively small cross section of the total number of people that have had experience with VET provided by CDU in this community. Collection of further data from other persons was largely limited by their to participate in the consultation due to travel or ongoing community commitments and the fact that some potential participants may have felt a degree of cross-cultural inhibition or 'shame' to participate. Focus groups were chosen for their ability to capitalise on communication processes between participants in order to generate data. Focus groups have the advantage of being non-discriminatory toward people who cannot read or write and they can encourage participation from people reluctant to be interviewed on their own or who feel they have nothing to say. (Kitzinger, 1995). Individual consultations were used for those participants who preferred to provide accounts of their experiences in a group setting. Both individual consultation and focus groups utilise oral methods that are respectful of an oral history tradition that is a characteristic feature of indigenous communities (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Consultations and focus group discussions were facilitated to cover a range topics around student satisfaction including; user choice, feedback, administrative support, language and literacy support, relationship building and the quality of instruction and learning resources. Members of key service provider organisations including the NMNRC, Sunrise Health Services and Wugularr School who have had contact with the university were also consulted to gauge the perception of the university's engagement practice from the perspective of community stakeholder organisations.

Data from focus groups and consultations was collected from participants as field notes, and then transcribed electronically into Journler<sup>TM</sup> software which facilitated the tagging of journal entries against key themes arising within entries. Thematic analysis comprises form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes reported by participants become the categories for analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). On the basis of its documented reliability in qualitative enquiry, thematic analysis was conducted on the resultant data to search for themes that emerge as being important to Community Engagement through the

voices of participants. This process involved the identification of key themes and associated attributes through meticulous and repeated reflection on the data (Rice & Ezzy, 1999).

Boolean responses to common lines of enquiry across the participant group's engagement experiences were tabulated and a mind mapped framework of emerging themes and accompanying characteristics constructed using MindNode<sup>TM</sup> software. The thematic framework was then fed back to participants on a return visit to the community for validation and to identify what participants considered constituting good community engagement practice by the university.

Key statements, stories and quotes by participants supporting the emergence of these themes are presented to preserve the 'authentic' voice of indigenous participants informing this study. Participants responses were then mapped as either positive or negative statements against the thematic framework. The difference between the number of positive and negative statements for each characteristic was calculated for each thematic element. This method provides an easy numerical indicator to support assertions arising from the main body of qualitative data, identify areas of potential concern and a means of presenting all responses received from participants which would otherwise be impossible.

## **Results and Discussion:**

A preliminary investigation of CDU records from recent training instances conducted in Wugularr suggests that problems with community engagement and educational delivery of VET may exist.

For the 2006 academic year CDU delivered 8328 contact hours to students in Wugularr across a variety of VET programs. For this year unit level completions were found to be very low (29.7%). In Term 1 of 2006, a single VET unit was found with 41 enrolments all resulted as having insufficient participation (IP); or in other words yet to attain competence (CDU 2007). To current date there has been to date no evidence of follow-up and reengagement with these learners to give them a chance to attain competence in this unit.

The following year in 2007 a total of 2515 contact hours were delivered in Wugularr to 148 students. Similarly, unit level completions were very low (26.4%). Poor engagement is suggested in the delivery of the unit HLTF1A: apply basic first aid where only 8 out of 20 participants attained competency in this unit (CDU 2007). Whilst individual learner and community issues can undoubtedly influence attendance and completion, rates of less than 50% for a highly practical unit requiring very modest levels of spoken English language proficiency

and no written English component are concerning. In line with the university's 'Doing VET better' initiative, preliminary plans have now been made to follow-up these students in a timely manner. Observations such as this highlight the importance of active student follow as an important element of community engagement practice in VET.

Feedback received from the 11 community participants over the three days of consultation with was analysed to consider the participants' quality of student experience and quality of engagement by CDU. From ensuing discussions a collection of common student experiences to which all participants provided boolean (yes/no) responses was tabulated. This data is presented in Table 1.

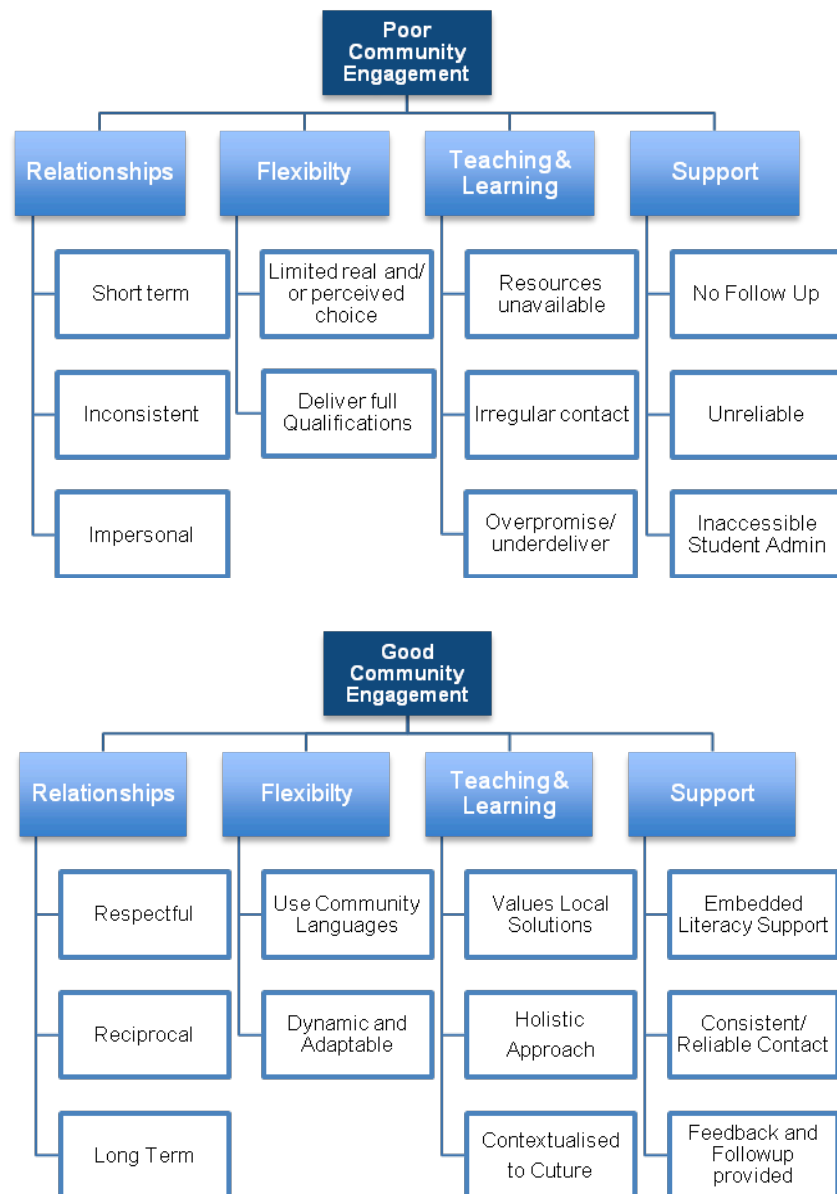
Student Experience of Community Engagement	Yes (%)
Completed study at CDU	45
Experience met expectations	27
Felt their community had choice in what courses were offered	9
Felt encouraged to learn by teaching staff	91
Thought teaching and learning materials were appropriate for their community	55
Was offered language and literacy support during study	9
Existing skills, previous training was checked and RPL offered	18
Informed of where and when study was happening in advance	55
Certificate or statement of attainment issued for completion of units or course	64
Teaching and learning staff provided feedback about progress	82
Provided an opportunity to give feedback to CDU	27

**Table 1: Summary of responses by Wugularr community members receiving VET training from CDU. (n=11)**

This data reveals an apparent area of disparity in student experience. Whilst most participants felt that they received adequate feedback and encouragement from teaching staff, few felt that their community had choice in what was offered, or were provided with an opportunity to provide university teaching and learning staff with feedback. Only a small number of participants felt that their student experience met their expectations of what they would have liked to receive. Most learners whilst reporting to have some proficiency in written and spoken English wanted to receive extra support as part of their courses. Few learners actually received this support either embedded within study programs or as a standalone component of their training.

Qualitative data from focus group and consultation documented in field notes was examined for significant themes emerging from each participant's related experience of engagement in the university's VET programs. Each theme was then examined for attributes that

potentially characterised good engagement practice as reported by participants and based on the application of grounded theories of community engagement. These themes and positive characteristics were then used to construct thematic frameworks illustrating what participants believed constituted poor and good community engagement practice. These thematic frameworks are presented in Figures 2.



**Figure 2: Positive and Negative themes emerging from consultation with Wugularr community members**

Selected stories relating to the themes emerging in discussion of the framework above and future involvement are presented below to further elaborate on the nature of the engagement relationship between CDU and Wugularr and give an authentic indigenous voice to this study.

### ***1) Relationships:***

When discussions with participants broached relationship building between CDU and their community the following selected accounts were recorded:

CB, a Mayali man and community elder felt that the *“University to be honest hasn’t done much here”*. He stated that lack of communication between the university and the community is a problem. *“People in the community perceive that the university is neither different nor any better than every other government department that wants to come here”*. He continued to say that *‘It is not easy to know when courses were on or what is available. They are not advertised or negotiated well. Most of it goes through NMNRC without much consultation from the community’*

RF, a Rembarrnga woman questioned the consistency and reliability of teaching staff stating that staff often don't *“come when they say they’re going to”*. This sentiment was also shared by DK also a Rembarrnga woman who felt that that lecturers should come to the community more often, and follow up student progress more so that students can work towards completion.

PF, a Western Aranda woman who has married into this community thought that *“Lecturers should stay longer, and build relationships with people”* if the university wants to improve its relationship and build trust with the Wugularr community in the future.

Not all experiences of relationship building described were negative. DD is a Ritherangu/ Rembarrnga man who was engaged in apprenticeship training with CDU in electrotechnology at Certificate II level. DD had an overwhelmingly positive experience of his study with CDU, and was happy with his course in all its aspects he described how his training was negotiated between GTNT, CDU and the New Apprenticeships Centre. DD described feeling empowered by this process and believed his *“culture was respected by this process”* of negotiation. DD's account highlights the importance of respect and reciprocity as key elements in relationship building, and perhaps also reflects the highly vocational nature of his course of study and the 'on the job' learning emphasis of apprenticeship training.

CR project manages a housing construction project in Wugularr in conjunction with CDU, which employs and trains eight local indigenous apprentices in general construction. He related a story that CDU started well with regular lecturer visits every 2 months for one week at a time, however a change in a lecturer’s personal circumstance changed this regularity of contact. CR felt that CDU lecturing staff sometimes had to cover a large geographical area making it hard to maintain close relationships with learners, and that lecturers didn’t seem to

receive sufficient administrative support, which may account for the lack of notification on course progression provided to learners.

GL the youth outreach worker for Sunrise Health Services believed that *“Training staff should be prepared to spend more time building relationships because culturally relationships are everything”*. R the principal of Wugularr school echoed these comments and added, *“CDU should form better linkages with community structures”* and become more involved in the community if it expects to gain respect and trust in Wugularr. In particular he noted that CDU should make strategic relationships with organisations such as NTOEC to provide distance education in Wugularr. He also suggested, *“CDU staff visiting the community should take the time to come and talk for 30 minutes at the school and provide extra time to build relationships for the future.”*

These accounts show a couple of good examples of respect and reciprocity as well as some evidence of community negotiated approaches to the delivery of vocational training; they are also significantly spoiled by a picture of inconsistency and short-term approaches to relationship building.

## **2. Flexibility:**

When discussions with participants broached flexibility of VET delivery by the university the following selected accounts were recorded:

CB felt that *“Uni needs to be more flexible for delivery to Aboriginal people”* in working with learners in his community. This statement was also confirmed by GL who stated that *“CDU needs to look at training on communities in a long term perspective rather than short courses so it all heads to full qualifications rather than just doing modules”* when discussing the necessity of the university to be flexible in the way it delivers training so the community can better create pathways to employment and qualifications.

DK related, *“When doing my studies the lecturer only came occasionally. I had to go to Katherine sometimes, would of preferred it here”* DK indicated she would still like to finish her Certificate III in business.

Some positive stories of flexible delivery also emerged around this theme:

DD stated that the university was *“very flexible with me when my community supervisor left”*. CDU's flexibility in this account extended beyond what may have been normally expected by helping DD find a new supervisor within his own community. He also said that *“Uni helped me a lot; get all my qualifications, paid for me to go to Darwin and the lecturers came here”*.

Similar stories emerged in a focus group with RF, PF and CB. All three women despite not completing many of the units they attempted, believed CDU's involvement in the Wugularr community has generally been positive. Patricia believed that her studies had helped her and given her ideas for the future. Similarly all three women also commented that teaching and learning activities provided by CDU in Wugularr were generally well organised and flexible to their culture. PF noted that the university's First Aid Trainers teamed their male trainer with male participants and their female trainer with female participants, which demonstrated willingness to respect, and work with cultural considerations.

In the university's recent skills audit across all Top End indigenous communities, GL related an example of a CDU staff member, fluent in Kriol language that was able to conduct all of his part of this community consultation in community language. Similarly, FJ, a worker in the Wugularr community patrol related that assessment of participants in patrol training programs was also conducted in Kriol, which is the primary community language used by patrol staff for routine interventions on shift. Role-play assessments done in Kriol were explained back to the assessor in English. The assessor using digital audio recording on his iPod then collected assessment evidence.

Not every story demonstrated an approach that was flexible in a way that met community need. CR described a missed opportunity for flexibility that would be advantageous to community participants, CDU and the Roper Gulf Shire alike. The council employs builder/trainers as direct everyday supervisors for general construction apprenticeships. Builder trainers are in a unique position to gather assessment evidence, however they were not provided with support to do so. CR stated that despite this opportunity *"Assessment tasks and log books were not made available to builder trainers"*.

Stories emerging from this theme showed examples of flexibility that utilise community languages, are dynamic, adaptable and are similarly to the previous theme, community negotiated. Despite this a mixed picture was still presented with other accounts pointing to approaches that were poorly negotiated and less than dynamic or adaptable.

### **3. Teaching and Learning:**

Again when the theme of teaching and learning was considered a mixture of stories arose highlighting exemplary and poor practice amongst teaching and learning staff. CF believed that CDU staff she had had contact with, were *"encouraging"*, *"easy to talk to"*, *"relaxed"* and cited of her lecturer that *"she explained the material well"*. Both CF and DK believed that feedback by CDU staff was provided in a useful, kind and friendly manner'. Confirming this, CB

commented that learning materials for his course especially those associated with using the computer were good. He stated that he was *“Happy with this course”*.

FJ and CH's experiences reflect a very different story. Whilst they considered the training materials and actual face-to-face delivery to be good; both men were clearly dissatisfied with the university's handling of their previous studies, which they indicated were well short of what they expected. Areas of concern included communication, course progression and consistency of delivery. The real problem that emerged for both men was the irregularity of delivery. GL confirmed that at one point in their course they received *“no training or no contact for 8 months.”*

CH stated that the wait was *“too long”* and that he thought the university had *“probably stuffed up, up there”*. The impact on this on CH's learning is also reflected in his statement: *“Too much waiting made me forget”*. FJ stated that his course progression was *“too long, three years to do a Cert III, too long”*. For FJ whose third language is English he felt that in some training sessions there were too many *“big words, no meaning”*. Whilst both men reported a similar experience the emotional impact of the experience on them was quite different. CH felt that he could *“just wait, taught me patience”*, whilst FJ found the experience *“made me feel bit sad”*.

A women's focus group held with CHB, RF and PF commented on the presentation of learning materials. They agreed teaching and learning activities were good however all three women were critical of resources provided and indicating they were not appropriate for their community. In some instances there were no resources of any kind distributed, and in other instances as described by PF they were given lots of loose sheet handouts, rather than workbooks which she felt would have been more appropriate for the community context.

CR summarised community sentiment well by stating that *“CDU is good at the teaching, but it often promises more than it can deliver, and this makes it look bad”*.

Discussions emerging here demonstrate some positive examples of flexible learning and assessment methods that are holistic, contextualised to community need and valuing community solutions. Data examples from CDU records however show that consistent student follow-up is a problem, a point that is also confirmed by some of the accounts provided by participants. The provision of learning materials appropriate for communities extends to beyond just the content of the material, and can also include physical form of the materials. Accounts describing large numbers of loose handouts demonstrate little understanding of the realities of community life,



whilst the non provision of materials provide a clear example of a situation where basic student needs were not being met irrespective of geographic locale.

#### **4. Support:**

This area received the most negative feedback from participants. Only a single extremely positive account of embedded literacy support in the general construction apprenticeship program was recorded. CR related that CDU lecturers were coming out to the site for one day every second week providing literacy support classes at the council office. He stated, *“Lecturers know what is happening for individual students. In this respect students are receiving good support and CDU are performing very well”*. The integration of literacy support was however not uniform across all programs. FJ stated that this was an area of real need for him however no such support was made to him over the three years of his study.

CB felt that the standard of student support he received when trying to find out course results and follow up an RPL application was unsatisfactory. He said, *“When you ring CDU you get the run around, that’s why people lose interest”*. CB also questioned the widely held perception about the levels of literacy and numeracy among Aboriginal people is poor. He articulated that these kinds of assumptions by Balanda have been more widespread since the Federal Government’s intervention into Aboriginal communities. CB felt that, *“The problem is more with written skills than numeracy or literacy. You only need to watch the card circles to see how well developed numeracy skills are. People need to see why they need to learn these”*.

CH and FJ both related a story in which they were told they were to graduate in October, instead they eventually graduated the following May. No explanation was provided to either of them for this. Similarly CR was critical of time delays experienced in receiving administrative support relating, *“After one year of work we had a training plan from CDU and NAC but no enrolments. The training plan was a generic document I could have done in 10 minutes that took seven months to get”*.

Participants' accounts for this theme show how embedded literacy support can work well in community settings, however it also points to the work ahead for the university to make this support more widely available to learners in all remote communities including Wugularr.

Few participants reported that they were given an opportunity to provide CDU with feedback, and most participants revealed that student support was difficult to access especially once lecturing staff leave the community and in the time between VET programs.

Whilst student support issues are clearly identified as an area of concern in the university's engagement practice it is also recognised that some of the issues arising in this theme are potentially outside the control of individual and small teams of remote area teaching staff, and potentially require more systemic institution wide solutions.

### ***5. Future Involvement***

Participants were finally asked to consider CDU's involvement in their community in the future, how it could change, and their perception of the future of this relationship. Despite a considerable amount of negative feedback received from participants previously most responses were generally positive, with participants expressing optimism toward the future. It should be noted however that whilst optimism is suggested by responses, a culture of 'gratuitous consent' is also a feature of cross-cultural communication in many indigenous communities that may also be illustrated in responses. Discernment between optimistic and gratuitously compliant responses is very difficult; their comments also reflected things they would like to see change in their own community and pointed to corresponding potential opportunities for better engagement by the university.

When CF & DK were asked what are the main areas of need in the community employment in local services was identified as central. CF expressed that she would like to see the development of a community library. She also expressed the desire to do Youth Work studies but be able to flexibly combine this training with another qualification in sport and recreation. Both women considered that education and training were important in allowing the community to meet these needs, and that CDU has a role to play in this. Similarly CHB, PF & RF thought the community really needed an adult learning centre equipped with computers and a library. They felt the university could help provide better access to driver training and licensing. Again, three women agreed that CDU had a role in providing training and education programs that would address these areas of need. RF again emphasised the importance of the university providing information on what it can offer the people of Wugularr.

CB also believed that CDU has a definite role to play in the future development of Beswick educationally, but stated, "*CDU needed to communicate better with the community.*" He continued by saying that CDU should "*Have a branch in Beswick, or a more permanent presence*".

DD considered the opportunity to gain meaningful work to be critical in his community. He thought that more opportunities like the one he was offered should be provided for young people in trades training such as plumbing and electrical. He said the university should offer

*“More traineeships to give the same opportunity for young people”. CR who offered a considerable amount of comment on his involvement with CDU reflected optimism toward change and growth of the relationship between the NMNRC and CDU in offering trades qualifications to learners in Wugularr. He said “Whilst things are not perfect we have high hopes for the future”. He also cited whilst that communication had been a problem with the university however things had been changing recently.*

In order to give a broader picture of community sentiment all responses provided by participants were examined for positive and negative statements around community engagement. A summary of all these mapped against the thematic framework is presented in Table 2 as a simple way of illustrating common areas of concern for participants and support the preceding qualitative data.

Theme	Characteristics	Positive Accounts (x)	Negative Accounts (y)	Difference (x-y)
<b>Relationships</b>	Respectful	25	12	13
	Reciprocal	18	11	7
	Long Term	21	24	-3
<b>Flexibility</b>	Use Community Languages	8	6	2
	Dynamic and Adaptable	26	19	7
<b>Teaching and Learning</b>	Values Local Solutions	17	9	8
	Holistic Approach	15	14	1
	Contextualised to Culture	23	12	11
<b>Support</b>	Embedded Literacy Support	5	23	-18
	Consistent reliable contact	20	42	-22
	Follow-up and feedback	14	20	-6
	opportunities provided			

**Table 2: Participant responses against emerging themes in Community Engagement (n=11)**

These results are suggestive that there are two principal spheres in which CDU needs to significantly change its community engagement practice in Wugularr. These are relationship building and ongoing student support. Within these themes the characteristics of concern are consistency of community contact, the provision of feedback opportunities, the provision of literacy support embedded in delivery and particularly consistency of communication with learners and other stakeholders.

Whilst the themes of flexible delivery and teaching and learning are of less concern areas were identified where improvement is necessary. These areas include active student follow-up, innovative and embedded use of community languages in delivery and community negotiation of programs that give greater levels of user choice to community members.

## Synthesis

Data triangulated from student records, participants, stories and thematic analysis of qualitative data suggests there are clear engagement problems by the university in Wugularr of which only a small proportion can be attributed to individual learner and intrinsic community issues.

Data from student records suggests that VET delivery in Wugularr whilst beneficial to the university in the short term has been both inconsistent and not necessarily as beneficial to the community as it could have been. Analysis of student records shows that in many areas unit level completion rates are quite low in some cases follow up is very slow to happen. Qualitative data from received from participants supports these observations with participants' stories revealing very mixed experiences of the university's engagement with their community. Participant accounts received during this study strongly suggest that good community engagement is primarily a characteristic of certain individual staff, occasionally a characteristic of some schools or small teams and not generally of the university as a whole. In Wugularr this has meant an erosion of trust and a reduction in community confidence in the university's capacity to enter a meaningful relationship to its members.

CDU therefore has an implied responsibility to rebuild this relationship in line with its regional responsibilities and the goals expressed in its 1<sup>st</sup> in 5 in 10 strategic plan. The potential conflict between the university's expressed strategy of improving indigenous engagement in education and training needs to be balanced carefully. The 'Doing VET better' initiative, with its small teams based approach presents a real framework where more personalised framework can be used to better engage communities and realign the university to this strategic goal.

The two major areas of concern arising from thematic analysis that represent key areas of future focus by the university are; long term reciprocal relationship building and the provision of quality student support. These two themes can be seen as two sides of the same coin; it is impossible to maintain meaningful long term relationships if learners are not provided with quality and reliable support services, whilst the provision of such services creates an environment of trust where long term relationships are able to grow.

User choice for Wugularr residents in regard to study at the university is dictated by a process of communication between CDU and RGSC (formerly NMNRC) and Sunrise Health, both of which employ indigenous people from Wugularr, but are managed from Katherine, and co-ordinated largely by non indigenous people or "*Balanda*". Whilst this does not mean that all planning decisions around training and education are done without consulting "*Bininj*", it does

mean that wider community involvement in the expression of community needs and educational aspirations and the resultant negotiation of appropriate education and training programs with CDU may be deficient. Both “*Balanda*” and “*Bininj*” participants identified that consistent communication was a problem area for the university. This single issue represents a significant challenge to the university potentially requiring a systemic change at an institutional level.

An interesting point of discussion arises in that most expressed dissatisfaction among participants with respect to the university’s involvement in their community was not around the actual performance of lecturing staff, who were frequently described in a very positive light. The greater issue revolved around inconsistencies with delivery and planning of delivery to suit the learner’s needs. Irregular and intermittent lecturer visits place undue stress on learners, and undoes the positives of the quality delivery. This was further compounded by the inability of the university to maintain continuity of relationships with community members within study programs. Participants comments stating that that lecturers seldom stay out there longer than a week highlights the importance of time in creating meaningful and mutually beneficial teaching and learning relationships with community members. From a human resources management perspective the difficulty of finding lecturing staff that are able to stay consistently within community settings for periods of time longer than one week should also not be understated. Accommodation in Wugularr is very limited, meaning lecturers need to either camp at the training venue or drive daily from Katherine. The former option whilst preferential in terms of good community engagement can be hard to “*sell*” to teaching staff, whilst the latter could be argued demonstrates an unwillingness to truly engage with the community.

Evaluation of VET delivery and engagement by the community was also identified in this study as an area for future improvement in practice. Few participants involved in the consultation identified that they were given the opportunity to evaluate their training. Accordingly the availability of any form of evaluation data for teaching and learning activities conducted by the university in Wugularr is also very limited. At this point in time the usual Student Experience of Teaching and Learning (SELT) tool used by the university has neither been widely used by remote area teaching staff, and could be considered to be an inappropriate tool for this purpose from both cultural and language and literacy standpoints. A commitment to developing an effective evaluation tool is an essential part of strengthening relationships here. The capacity for the university to provide a mechanism for the community to have a voice in how training occurs in their community is integral to the university demonstrating respect to the people of Wugularr and an essential part of demonstrating good community engagement and continuous improvement in its delivery VET programs.

Remote area VET educators do need to think more creatively when using training packages, and utilise evidence collection methods developed to suit community needs, especially around language and literacy. The reality of community life and vocational roles in Wugularr is that for most part spoken interactions between community members are in Kriol language. The ability to develop flexible assessment tools that respect this fact and that are reliable enough to collect evidence of competency is essential to the long term relevance of VET training in Wugularr and other remote communities in this region.

Learners that reported receiving no language and literacy support were unfortunately quite common amongst participants, yet a striking example emerged from the CDU Trades team to who have now embedded literacy programs in their General Construction apprenticeships. This changed approach not only demonstrates the university's capacity to be dynamic and adaptable but also highlights the potential for responsiveness that is facilitated by the small teams approach under the 'Doing VET Better' initiative.

## **Summary, Conclusions and Implications**

There is a definite need to be flexible in the way we use training packages in indigenous communities including Wugularr that allow for customisation to the community's unique context. The combination of Sport and Recreation training package units as electives within Certificate III and IV Youth Work programs as suggested by CF is possible under NTIS packaging rules, but not something regularly done or considered by training providers. Other packaging combinations that match the vocational aspirations of community members also need to be explored and mapped.

A potential future focus for the university should be the enabling of individual VET teaching staff or community focussed teams to deliver a wider range of units of competence in Wugularr and other remote communities. This approach provides familiar individual or team 'faces' which provide the university with a localised identity that is friendly, interested, informed and responsive to changing community need. It will also help build longer-term relationships and facilitate the negotiation of mutually beneficial community outcomes with a broader range of community members. Teaching staff who build longer term associations are able to provide greater consistency and are in a better position to actively follow up learners who need extra work to achieve competence and negotiate strategic collaboration with other stakeholders in the community. This in turn opens up possibilities for innovative solutions including better access to traineeships, embedded community development projects, hybridised programs across training packages and the use of emerging digital technologies to better facilitate distance education.

Another key area for exploration for the university is how it prepares its teaching staff for travel and work within indigenous communities, in particular the importance of acquiring Indigenous Knowledge and gaining cultural competence to allow the best chance of success in engaging indigenous communities. This is by no means an easy thing. Finding indigenous or cross culturally competent staff who are willing to travel and stay within community settings can be difficult. This means that experienced and highly skilled people can become spread thinly across a number of communities which even for the most experienced worker can diminish their effectiveness in engaging discrete communities. Another option is undoubtedly the overhaul of the staff induction process for new university employees. Staff routinely working within indigenous community contexts should be required to demonstrate cross cultural competence prior to entering communities to train. This extends to more than simply attending a one day workshop; and could perhaps be linked to an accredited unit of competence for example: “HLTHIR404B- Work Effectively with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait islander people”, or an appropriate entry in their VET lecturer matrix, or a formal mentoring and supervision arrangement of new staff by cross culturally competent staff.

The recognition that meaningful and respectful engagement with indigenous communities is the precursor successful to VET delivery is essential. At the heart of good community engagement lays the building of quality, mutually beneficial relationships. By its very nature this entails a corresponding building of confidence and trust that may be eroded, non-existent and linked to a historical context of repression and lack of opportunity for indigenous people. This is not something that can be achieved quickly, importantly it takes time, flexibility and consistency and ongoing support to achieve, especially in communities such as Wugularr where the history of engagement has been mixed. The rewards are however great, and critical for the university to meet both its future strategic goals and regional responsibilities.

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